VONNEGUT AT HAMPDEN-SYDNEY

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VONNEGUT AT HAMPDEN-SYDNEY

Foreword
Michael Boudreau
5

The Fool for God
Alan F. Farrell
7

Address Given at Hampden-Sydney College
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.
29

FOREWORD

If Kurt Vonnegut had never come to Hampden-Sydney, life around this old College would have gone on without any notable change, but the fact is that he *did* come, on September 27, 1983, and that *is* worth remembering. He is hardly typical of what we see the most of in Southside Virginia; he had never seen so many Republicans in one place at one time since the last Inauguration, if he bothered to watch *that*, and he felt outnumbered. And for an hour in Fleet Gymnasium, in front of nearly 1750 people, he harangued the war-mongers, computers, and Shakespeare. He even took a quick stab at William Styron. You can read it all here.

The Sunday beforehand, September 25, Alan Farrell delivered his "pre-Vonnegut lecture" in Parents and Friends Lounge, invited the audience out to his house for drinks afterwards, and said that we could print his stuff too. He did not draw any pictures, but he did show us Mr. Vonnegut's rendition of an asshole. You can find that in *Breakfast of Champions*. While he was here Mr. Vonnegut confined himself to geometrical illustration.

This book was produced with the generous sponsorship of Hampden-Sydney College because enough people thought that both lectures were worth remembering. We hope you agree.

M.B.

The Fool for God

Alan F. Farrell

Good people, our text for this evening is taken from the words of the Psalmist, number fifty-three, verses one through three:

> *The fool hath said in his heart,*
> *"There is no God." Corrupt are they,*
> *and have done abominable iniquity.*
> *There is none that doeth good.*
>
> *God looked down from Heaven upon*
> *the children of men to see if there*
> *were any that did understand and that*
> *did seek God.*
>
> *Every one of them is gone back: they*
> *are altogether become filthy; there*
> *is none that doeth good, no, not one.*

And also from the words of Kurt Vonnegut:

> I wish I could bring light to *your* tunnels today. My wife begged me to bring you light, but there *is* no light. Everything is going to become unimaginably worse, and never get better again. If I lied to you about that, you would sense that I'd lied to you, and that would be another cause for gloom. We have enough causes for gloom.

THOSE of you who have heard me speak before and know how I am frequently lured into talking about things I know not of will know that I routinely dismiss charges of total ignorance by allowing that I *have* read a couple of paperbacks. My way of saying that no one in particular knows anything about it and what the hell why is my ignorance any more forlorn than another and so why not? In this case, I *have* read a couple of paperbacks, probably no more recently than you, if perhaps a bit more carefully than you because, after all, books is my business. In fact, in this case, curiously enough, it is appropriate that I say "paperbacks" because I really don't know of anyone who reads Vonnegut other than in paper. He is a paperback writer in the largest sense of that term, notably in this: that he writes for the paperback mind, and, whatever we may think, in haughty retreat out here among the aorists and literary subjunctives, of paperback minds there are a whole bunch out beyond the Exxon station.

I am here not so much because I do know anything particular about Vonnegut, but because I suspect that most of you don't, and I think you should, and I'm evidently the only one dumb enough to stand up here and let whichever two or three of you out there who really *do* know something about Vonnegut ask me snippy questions when it's over. So be it, though I can't honestly say I *really like* Vonnegut. I know for the most part about him the same things you may: he is a sort of preposterous, cranky, reclusive figure, pumps out a novel regularly every three years, sports a 1968 hairdo, hides out in New York someplace, and has let himself be made into one of the snoringest movies ever. He sounds sort of leftish and probably was against the war in Viet Nam. He writes short little books with short little sentences and short little ideas.

They seem sort of formless, shambling, chatty.

Slim praise. Yet there is something I *kind of like* in Vonnegut. Let me see if I can tell you what it is and how I noticed and why I think you may not have.

THERE'S this professor at Columbia named Paul Fussell. He pronounces it Fussell as in Russell. He was an infantry platoon leader in France in World War II, was shot up, and became a college professor so he wouldn't ever have to work again. He has written a prize-winning interpretive book called *The Great War and Modern Memory* which sustains as its thesis the almost ritual descent of literature into a new and ironic form that is "outrageous...ridiculous, and ...murderous." For Fussell such irony results from the comparison of preposterous expectations of the ideal and squalid manifestations of the real. This mode—and Fussell is citing here Northrop Frye—is characterized by images of "frustration, bondage, and absurdity." Order in such a world is only external, or externally imposed. He says "it is only the *ex post facto* view of an action that generates coherence or makes irony possible."

Now it sure sounds to me as though he means that you have to be both inside and outside this bizarre world—ours, by the bye—to understand it. He calls this sort of double vision a "differentiated view." And this "differentiated view" of "frustration, bondage, and absurdity" is what makes the memoir of that experience so hard to compile. The very idiom which best retrieves the immediacy of the moment will be, paradoxically, just what denies it to the reader or spectator. Fussell is speaking, specifically, about the memoir of combat, a particularly irretrievable kind of experience of which he has some knowledge first hand. His *own* failure to communicate his *own*

bondage in that surreal world, his frustration at the unavailability of a medium—or, in my view, of an audience—for this sort of communication has led him to describe himself and anyone like him as "a pissed-off infantryman."

This *ex post facto* business makes me think. Listen:

In November of 1968 I jump off an aircraft eighty kilometers behind enemy lines in western Indochina. For three days we prowl the ridgelines and scour trails. On about the fourth day we pass, out of hunger and fatigue, over an invisible threshold into an unreal world of reeling shadows and whining insects. Sunken into a torpor over which waves of nausea roll without respite, I scan a far-off crest with binoculars. Something moving. Squinting through the lenses I make out the lumbering shape of an elephant, galumphing along with the barrel and recoil tubes of a mountain howitzer on its back. I crawl to the radio, key the set, and announce a sighting, which I then have to encrypt, since our shorthand code books do not have a provision for "elephant." In a world already colored with absurdity, I find myself saying, "Sandbox, this is Leghorn. I kak alpha delta zulu juliet romeo quebec alpha uniform end of kak over." Static snarls in the interim between transmissions. The disembodied voice on the other end finally replies calmly enough through the fog of code: "Leghorn, this is Sandbox. I kak alpha golf zulu," and on and on. "Engage target. Destroy." I look through the binoculars again. The elephant is lurching rhythmically along, quite oblivious to the interest it has aroused. Three thousand meters first off. The chance of outmaneuvering that thing through triple canopy jungle risible. And then what to "destroy" it with? We have five 9mm submachineguns and a 40mm grenade launcher. I can already see the enraged elephant, its trunk snaked around me, dashing me up and down against the ground while 9mm rounds bounce off its massive forehead. "Sandbox, this is Leghorn. I kak delta bravo," and on and on. "Cannot comply." Static. Elephant placidly swinging side to side. "Leghorn, this is Sandbox. I kak victor yankee lima lima," and on and on. "Aircraft inbound. Direct fire."

Fifteen minutes out of Da Nang a sortie of jets appears, fires 20mm cannon along the jungle trail. The animal staggers, goes down on its front legs, unfurls its trunk, and topples heavily onto its side. And that, as they say, is that. An absurd moment, you might say. Well, fact is that *other* soldiers had destroyed such animals in the war. It wasn't uncommon. And those small howitzers *had* taken lives from emplacements across the border. And *I* had done *worse*. So what significance did that sordid little vignette hold for me? Virtually none. It rode in on a wave of fatigue so completely brutalizing that I thought not much at all about it, till....

Till one day, three years later, in the Wessel Library at Tufts while, for some obtuse reason, I was reading Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. Describing the Roman games in the Colosseum at Empire's end, Gibbon cites a contemporary chronicler on the appearance of animals as adversaries for men. Gladiators were, it seems, routinely pitted against all manner of strange beasts, armed in odd fashion to beguile the multitude. On one unhappy occasion, a small, bloody group of men, having skewered on their spears a singularly animated elephant, stood about as the stricken creature dropped to its knees in the dust and, in a last anthropomorphic gesture, raised its trunk as though to beg for mercy. That touching moment so inflamed the public that amid howls of execration for the stagers of the event, they tore down the stands and would have mobbed the Emperor were it not for the Pretorians. You see, the absurdity of their condition had been revealed to those people, if only for a second.

Suddenly I had a meaning for that dark comedy in the

jungle. Suddenly a flash came over me, me who am hardly given to flashes. The whole ludicrous weight of a futile adventure settled in my heart and has shaded my aspirations and moods ever since. The first days under its spell were to me somber indeed, and few there were to whom I could communicate what gripped me. I was suppose to be a man of ideas, yet I could not deal with the fact that an idea had lit upon me and would not be dispelled. That sad passage, found almost at random in Gibbon, a book I avow no healthy person would ever have his nose found in, was the cypher that unlocked a deep mystery and colored forever my life. *Ex post facto.* That's what Fussell meant. And it happened to Vonnegut too.

NOW when Vonnegut was a college student he was almost as big an imbecile as you. He wrote hopelessly pompous and pubescent prose for the school newspaper and protested, as was the studently thing in those days, the American thrust into World War II. Later he found himself swept along on a rising tide of sentiment into that conflict to serve in the infantry, as an *éclaireur* or scout, an oddly appropriate role in view of the trade he has seemingly chosen for himself: prophet. Somewhere near the end of the war in Europe the Germans captured him and interned him at a prisoner-of-war camp in Dresden. That lovely city had been declared internationally open; that is, the Germans had agreed not to emplace defenses in it in exchange for tacit agreement by the Allies not to bomb it. Well, things change, and one fine day British and American bombers razed Dresden and within minutes incinerated nearly 100,000 persons. Vonnegut was there. He was locked in the only place the Germans could find to hold prisoners in that decaying world: an abondoned slaughterhouse. Number 5, in fact.

Out of the service, Vonnegut picked up a life blandly lived according to the conventions of a solidly middle-class Indiana family and became an engineer. Worked for General Electric, as it turns out. But, he later suggested, there were noises in his head. And one day he found himself reading the strange and disjointed autobiography of a demented French doctor, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, a hero from World War I, who set out in chatty, vicious, shambling fragments of sentence a sight he witnessed one day in 1916. In those days a squad in the French Army drew, every day or so, its own victuals and prepared its own meals. There was no consolidated mess. On this one day the quartermaster had selected a small clearing and laid out on the grass the meat ration, freshly butchered, for a whole regiment. Céline walked up and down row upon row of carcass, gut, haunch, head, tongue, sinew, fat, blood, bone, gore. He looked at all that viand and reflected that within hours the men in the same regiment would lie in similar meadows and in similar condition.

When Vonnegut read that, something went off in his head. Here is what he said:

> When I got home...I thought of writing my war story, too. All my friends were home; they'd had wonderful adventures, too. I went down to the newspaper office, The *Indianapolis News,* and looked to find out what they had about Dresden. There was an item about half an inch long, which said our planes had been over Dresden and two had been lost. And so I figured, well, this really was the most minor sort of detail in World War II. Others had so much more to write about. I remember envying Andy Rooney, who jumped into print at that time; I didn't know him, but I think he was the

first guy to publish his war story after the war; it was called *Tail Gunner.* Hell, I never had any classy adventure like that. But every so often I would meet a European and would be talking about the war and I would say I was in Dresden; he'd be astonished that I'd been there, and he'd always want to know more....I said, By God, I saw something after all! I would try to write my war story, whether it was interesting or not.

He went and talked that old pirate Guggenheim into funding his recollection. He scribbled out his frantic memoir in what he was to call, and to perfect, the telegraphic schizophrenic style. "Unstuck in time," as he admits, the tale winds in and out of the surreal like Joseph Heller's *Catch-22,* punctuated by the refrain "And so it goes." This is what he says about the novel:

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE
OR
THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE
A DUTY-DANCE WITH DEATH
BY
KURT VONNEGUT, JR.
A FOURTH GENERATION GERMAN-AMERICAN
NOW LIVING IN EASY CIRCUMSTANCES
ON CAPE COD
(AND SMOKING TOO MUCH),
WHO, AS AN AMERICAN INFANTRY SCOUT
HORS DE COMBAT,
AS A PRISONER OF WAR,
WITNESSED THE FIRE-BOMBING
OF DRESDEN, GERMANY,
"THE FLORENCE OF THE ELBE,"
A LONG TIME AGO,
AND SURVIVED TO TELL THE TALE.

THIS IS A NOVEL
SOMEWHAT IN THE TELEGRAPHIC SCHIZOPHRENIC
MANNER OF TALES
OF THE PLANET TRALFAMADORE,
WHERE THE FLYING SAUCERS
COME FROM.

Vonnegut had discovered that he, too, was a pissed-off infantryman. And pissed-off with good reason.

"ONLY the cowards come back from war," wrote Jean Giraudoux in a 1938 parable for our times called *The Trojan War Will Not Happen.* He was saying out loud what homefolks have found ways—countless and unspoken for the most part—to say to soldiers straggling home from battle with glazed eyes, cropped hair, and faded uniforms. The internal exile of veterans is a persistent issue even in our times, deriving as it does from the warrior's suspicion that his sacrifice will never be understood by those he has fought for, but deriving *also* from the insufficiency of conventional, orderly language to frame what he has seen and done. War is no longer "exploit," as it was for primitive societies, but rather the rupture of the continuum of familiarity. And among those things dislocated by the cataclysm is the very medium by which ordinary men inventory the meager contents of their world: language. The phenomenon of alienation—a social one—belongs to the idiom in which it is couched—a linguistic one. I quote Aldous Huxley here, from *Science and Literature:*

> The elements of experience which are unique, aberrant, other-than-average, remain outside the pale of common language. But it is precisely these elements of man's more private experiences that the literary

> artist aspires to communicate. For this purpose common language is wholly inadequate. Every literary artist must therefore invent or borrow some kind of uncommon language capable of expressing, at least partially, those experiences which the vocabulary and syntax of ordinary speech so manifestly fail to convey.

And so it is that the disjointed rhetorical period of popular speech and the elliptical vocabulary of slang, that language of *out*casts and *in*itiates (are they really different?), represent a refusal to describe unconventional things in conventional symbols. Those people who stagger under life's blows try to make themselves understood through this "telegraphic schizophrenic manner"; they stand on the verge of articulation, choking with shock, horror, boredom, and shame. Not for them the ponderous hypotactic, that is, subordinate, grammar of written discourse.

THOSE of you who heard me speak about the rhythm of modern literature last year may recall my claim that the matter of voice in narration has become increasingly significant as artists have sought "novel" and more intensive means for externalizing inner perception. The essentially linear medium of traditional prose has given way to flux and a rightful resurrection of the Aristotelian "lexis eromene" or "strung-together-style" for storytelling. That the voice or vantage point of a narrator should be integral with narrative itself and should thereby provide the illusion of immediacy or "living speech" has made the ear the prime instrument and arbiter in textual judgment. A whole literature has sprung up, essentially since the First World War, refusing to subscribe to

linear conceptions of what we have known as "time" and "text." Of course this isn't the first time we've made such a shift. Discoveries about interchange between oral culture and literate have spilt much ink in the scholarly world. The transfer, one author asserted, was "from the stability of essential story, which is the goal of oral tradition, to the stability of text, the exact words of the story." Patterns of spoken language grew farther and farther apart from printed forms. Now we're printing the spoken forms. The original process was thought to be evolutionary. No one much imagined the curious anomaly by which written discourse would adapt to spoken, the very reverse of the process the formulaists presupposed.

Now Vonnegut shared with others an experience in the truest sense "unutterable" which unhinged time for him and which he tried to vain to put aside. From the ferment of silence, about twenty years it seems to me, came a literary product as remarkable for its form as for its content. The style, the meter is visceral or primitive, spontaneous. It is complicitous, inviting, irreflexive. It is a language, as I have to my regret said in print, "a meld of tenor and vehicle"; that is, the *content* and *container* are the same. That is to say that Vonnegut's language and his intention are one. "The medium is the message," as Professor McCluhan used to say. This kind of language refuses conventional "literary" analysis as steadfastly as readers have refused to analyze it. Vonnegut has, for example, been treated to the epithet "mush" by some fairly enlightened critics. Such judgments reflect already a *parti pris* belonging to traditional linear narrative.

AS for Vonnegut's style, it is hardly what I would recommend as preparation for the Rhetoric exam. But it is this: it is Anglo-Saxon. Vonnegut is, if nothing else, true to the spirit and fire of this tongue. He chooses his words from the powerful monosyllables of English, and his thoughts strike out with that same awful and perhaps too-familiar directness of the speech we reserve for intimate commerce and inelegant occasions. It is perhaps the untoward circumstance of finding such speech printed that works so many critics into a lather on Vonnegut's account. Even Vonnegut's titles reflect rather the Anglo-Saxon than the latinate we reserve for the visibly and deliberately lofty, as:

Jailbird
Player Piano
Deadeye Dick
Slapstick
Slaughterhouse-Five
Breakfast of Champions

I think *champion* and *piano* are the only latinates in that list. Vonnegut, like Rabelais, his forebear, loves to play with words. He drones on about etymologies, delivers little lessons, little homilies on derivations, invents fortuitously ringing words of his own. Listen:

Deadeye Dick
"Deadeye Dick," like "Barnacle Bill," is a nickname for a sailor. A deadeye is a rounded wooden block, usually bound with rope or iron, and pierced with holes. The holes receive a multiplicity of lines, usually shrouds or stays, on an old-fashioned sailing ship. But in the American Middle West of my youth, "Deadeye Dick" was an honorific often accorded to a person who was a virtuoso with firearms.

So it is a sort of lungfish of a nickname. It was born in the ocean, but it adapted to life ashore.

Or:

Foma, Wampeters, and *Granfalloons*
Dear Reader: The title of this book is composed of three words from my novel *Cat's Cradle.* A *wampeter* is an object around which the lives of many otherwise unrelated people may revolve. The Holy Grail would be a case in point. *Foma* are harmless untruths, intended to comfort simple souls. An example: "Prosperity is just around the corner." A *granfalloon* is a proud and meaningless association of human beings.

I suppose *Slaughterhouse* is his best-known piece, though President Bunting has reminded me more than once that enlisted men should never write memoirs. And Vonnegut was enlisted. Criminally enlisted. Terminally enlisted. Congenitally enlisted. He refers to himself, even to this day, as "Corporal Vonnegut." You must understand the significance of this small society, this sacred precinct, as I have so often called it. Reluctant heroes of the Vonnegut stamp live in a world bounded by ineluctable rigor, obstacles that bring up short their only-too-human resistance to impressment. The enlisted man, like his larger-scale counter part *homo sapiens,* lives in confinement, the walls of which he constantly tests, if

he has any life in him at all, off which walls he constantly caroms, one to another. Again, if you will permit me a simple-minded parable from my own experience...

The speech of the soldier is loaded with terms for these boundaries. A soldier spends hours devoid of individuality among those who, like him, have surrended the substance of individuality. He learns to express the fairly narrow perimeters of his confinement, itself perhaps the model of a larger reality, in a language at once parabolic and precise, though to the initiate, absurd. Observers of the Calley trial, for example, were fascinated by the Viet Nam soldiers' language. The expression "wasted" (killed, dead) was on everyone's lips for a time, but few understood that this word was simply part of a larger and quite specific lexicon. Consider a fragment of this system: KIA, WIA, MIA, AWOL (Killed in Action, Wounded in Action, Missing in Action, Absent Without Leave). These are the well-known contingencies of military life, distilled into abbreviation because accountability within this society is on paper, where formulas reduce each specific case to its type and where types are minimal. But the soldier views obliquely and speaks ironically: TYT (Take Your Time, a dead man); LBJ (Lyndon Baines Johnson? No. Long Binh Jail, the correctional facility, consequence of transgression); FUO and NSU (The two most common causes for exemption from duty: Fever Unknown Origin, usually malaria, and Non-Specific Urethritis, usually venereal disease). These are the limits of order in the soldier's world, where he pursues a wandering and reluctant course between twin perils: unpleasant duty on the one hand, by which his role is defined, and punishment on the other, by which rebellion is quashed. The soldier is, in a word, TYT, in LBJ, has NSU or FUO; if not, he is FD (For Duty). In the end, a blueprint emerges, a linguistic blueprint, for a wholly linguistic mechanism

affirming a set tension between individual and community.

In the enlisted world there are really only two crimes, two infractions of the order of things to which the most perverse give themselves over with delight; I know I did and do. These are crimes against progress, civilization, society, direction, and reason, and warmly embraced by the wicked. They are indifference and insubordination. Indifference is, in the Army, failure to recognize one's station; insubordination, the failure to remain in it. The one often presupposes the other. Vonnegut's writings reflect again and again a stolid indifference—even Vonnegut's church is that of "God the utterly indifferent." This indifference, however, is no passive response: it is violent, threatening, ambitious, and, as I have said, perverse. It was that resistance to the way of things that Camus called "absurd," and he saw himself laureated Nobel for it. Insubordination is failure to respect convention, even grammatical: very few subordinate clauses, proportionally speaking, in Vonnegut, because he writes as we speak, paratactically, in short, clipped utterances. If you want an anal-neurotic chore sometime, take a few pages of Vonnegut and count up the latinates. Show the proportion as a ratio to the entire text inspected. Do the same with Melville or Hawthorne, even Updike or Heller. Let me know.

WHO is Vonnegut? I don't know. He hides his face with that bristling mustache and exaggerated, clown-like head of hair. It is for that reason, that and his novel *Slapstick*, that I call him the Fool for God. The Fool, you remember, says in his heart that there is no God; but the same Fool, according to Saint Anselm at least, does by this very act of doubt prove the existence of the deity. It is his doubt of God that proves the existence of something greater than conception, and that

implies reality. An old proof, for all that. It is certain, though, that Vonnegut's morality is Christian: "For God's sake be kind to each other," he says. So did the Christ.

I do know that he has hidden his identity in a string of autobiographical works and that Vonnegut alter-egos thread their aging, desperate way through his "saga" and aplenty; and just listen to the names, will you:

Kilgore Trout
Elliot Rosewater
Walter Starbuck
Billy Pilgrim
Wilbur Swain

Vonnegut has produced an *oeuvre* largely autobiographical, whose point of departure is a dark disquiet spawned by wartime memories of the "duty-dance with death" (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 1969) and the frustration of reintegrating into a too-orderly society (*Player Piano*, 1957). The trail of Vonnegut's alter-egos is the itinerary of a paunchy, liberal literatus through the wasteland of middle America (*Breakfast of Champions*, 1973), prison (*Jailbird*, 1979), and apocalypse (*Slapstick*, 1976).

Vonnegut has chosen autobiography and science-fiction: the past, that is, and the future. Grammatically, however, these are facets of a single phenomenon, a departure from the *reality* of a temporal present. Technically, such a departure commits us to the preterit, for autobiography and memoir, and to the conditional, for hypothesis and science-fiction. Esthetically, we recognize a need for the familiar *immediacy* of the present. But can one speak from a page? The artful contrivance of immediacy is no light feat; it is necessarily understood in a frame of reference to which only the narrator

is privy. An era like our own, which, in T. S. Eliot's words, offers no more than a "panorama of futility and anarchy," may lay claim to little other as its idiom than a language of arhythmia and dislocation. We, the shades who people Auden's "age of anxiety," are bound up in a dispiriting and visceral confusion and do cherish, oddly, spokesmen who incessantly and pitilessly exacerbate our disquiet. It is a shrill jeremiad, the more chilling as the author sinks into unshriven old age, the more virulent as his most calamitous prophecies on human destiny seem to be coming true.

If rage is indeed a spontaneous eruption of unbridled animality, how can it be shown in a diagram? How can it be made clear to the paradigmatic mentality of "modern" man who has allegedly shucked off his responsiveness to instinct? Just as Aristotle defined chaos in terms of order, and, therefore, bound the notion of disarray inextricably to that of array, so it is often that chaos in literature is reaction rather than action independent. Vonnegut, for example, has said of his relations with the orderly intellect in America: "I myself have been rejected again and again." He speaks darkly of "them." Martyrdom? Paranoia? Or the unhappy accident of a style derived from the idiom of those least likely to read but most likely to understand, and served up to those most likely to read but least likely to understand. "They" are a public steeped in "continuous" tradition and conditioned to see in "groomed" narrative evidence of a tale-teller's worth, but not able to distinguish between seasoned disorder and unalloyed anarchy or "automatic" art. And so it goes.

NOW I've spent my whole life chasing down Ciceronian clauses and deciphering the sort of constipated, conventional, and satisfying messages that Milton, Dickens, Hawthorne, Descartes, and Racine send. That's what I was doing in Gibbon that unlucky day. But I'll tell you what draws me to Vonnegut sometimes, and that is his simple Anglo-Saxon rage. When a school board of self-satisfied cretins in North Dakota wants his books burned, I love him all the more. When the *New York Times* calls his sputtering invective "mush," I claim him for my own. When he can't print on paper and publish what I have said in Saigon, in Paris, in Boston, and, Lord save me, in Southside Virginia, then he is my brother. Here is what he has said about such freedom:

> I will speak of Thomas Aquinas instead. I will tell you my dim memories of what he said about the hierarchy of laws on this planet, which was flat at the time. The highest law, he said, was divine law, God's law. Beneath that was natural law, which I suppose would include thunderstorms, and our right to shield our children from poisonous ideas, and so on.
>
> And the lowest law was human law.
>
> Let me clarify this scheme by comparing its parts to playing cards. Enemies of the Bill of Rights do the same sort of thing all the time, so why shouldn't we? Divine law, then, is an ace. Natural law is a king. The Bill of Rights is a lousy queen.
>
> The Thomist hierarchy of laws is so far from being ridiculous that I have never met anybody who did not believe in it right down to the marrow of his or her bones. Everybody knows that there are laws with more grandeur than those which are printed in our statute books. The big trouble is that there is so little agreement as to how those grander laws are worded. Theologians can give us hints of the wording, but it takes a dictator to set them down just right—to dot the *i*'s and cross the *t*'s. A man who had been a mere corporal in the army did that for Germany and then for all of Europe, you may remember, not long ago. There was nothing he did not know about divine and natural law. He had fistfuls of aces and kings to play.
>
> Meanwhile, over on this side of the Atlantic, we were not playing with a full deck, as they say. Because of our Constitution, the highest card anybody had to play was a lousy queen, contemptible human law. That remains true today. I myself celebrate that incompleteness, since it has obviously been so good for us.

I am not sure I like the way Vonnegut writes. I am not sure I want my students to write the way Vonnegut writes. But I know I want my students to see the way Vonnegut sees. And if his sulky, parlous, and, yeah, yeah, vulgar prose—for God's sake, he draws a picture of an asshole in *Champions*—can make them see that well and spare them what it took to make him and me see, then I want him read, if not imitated. Here is what he says about such art:

An artist, a minimalist, Rabo Karabekian, has discovered that man is nothing but a vertical band of white light. He expresses this discovery on canvas:

> The original was twenty feet wide and sixteen feet

high. The field was *Hawaiian Avocado*, a green wall paint manufactured by the O'Hare Paint and Varnish Company in Hellertown, Pennsylvania. The vertical stripe was day-glo orange reflecting tape.

Inevitably some woman defiantly assures Karabekian that her "five-year-old son" could do as well. Karabekian wishes he would:

> "The painting did not exist until I made it," Karabekian went on. "Now that it does exist, nothing would make me happier than to have it reproduced again and again, and vastly improved upon, by all the five-year-olds in town. I would love for your children to find pleasantly and playfully what it took me many angry years to find."

The immense embrace of Vonnegut's vision, together with his persistent return to a single motif—man's cowardice, lubricity, idiocy—offers an encapsulated assay of the age. His choice of idiom is crucial, I suggest, since by its vulgarity, an association with a given class of the social order, and its rejections of the subordinate grammar and thus the ordinate aspriations of yet another class, such language intensifies the atmosphere of ostracism, which is in fact the text of the sermon. Those who have fought, and for whom the interstice between ideal and real is no longer an unknown, have contracted what Vonnegut calls "Tourette's disease" and express themselves in periodic obscenity. Their disaffection continues to fill our prisons, our madhouses, our newspapers. The odyssey of Vonnegut is one through the bedlam of our epoch. How his language makes us hear the death-rattle of our own

kind in all its guttural agony and leaves us to tremble with rage and horror is an artifice, I contend, which first charms us with the familiar notes of our "unguarded" speech, the product of a fine ear for the music of the species, then draws us into complicity so that we are in the end shaking a fist with Kilgore Trout at the monstrous edifice that has seemingly set all its devices upon the abjection of its already humble denizens.

WELL, I got through this speech about Vonnegut without saying *the* word. You know which one. Wasn't sure if I would make it. Vonnegut didn't make it. He said in print that word. And the Drake, North Dakota, School Board is on his trail for it. So is the Nobel Prize Committee on his trail for it. And for this. Wilbur Daffodil-11 Swain's epitaph. From *Slapstick*.

> *And how did we then face the odds,*
> *Of man's rude slapstick, yes, of God's?*
> *Quite at home and unafraid,*
> *Thank you,*
> *In a game our dreams remade.*

Address Given at Hampden-Sydney College

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

I'M sure you're aware that your President was a man of extraordinary integrity during the war in Vietnam, and I'm honored to be present at an institution headed up by such a gentleman. It's nice to be in the South again. I love to come south because it's still perfectly respectable to commit suicide by cigarette here. Ashtrays everywhere. It's lovely.

I'm told that ninety percent of you are Republicans. That must be suffocating at times, to be such an unrepresentative population sample. I think I know what Robert E. Lee felt like when he went inside the courthouse at Appomattox and found nothing but Republicans in there. I sometimes tell audiences that if you really want to hurt your parents and you don't have nerve enough to be a homosexual, the least you can do is go into the Arts. In your case you have another alternative, which is to become Democrats.

I was asked if I would allow the College to publish my remarks, and I said "sure." But they're really going to be unpublishable, I think, as they're going to be very disorderly. And certainly not as nicely put together as William Styron's speech of two years ago, which looks lovely set in type and reads very well.

I know what you've all come to hear, and I'm prepared to satisfy you in full. I know what the burning question of the moment is—that hot coal of a question in the mind of each and every one of you. I will not shilly-shally. I will not evade that question. Will not send you out of here dissatisfied. Will not fail to quench that coal. The burning question on every American campus I visit is this: "Do you use a word-processor?" The answer is "No, I do not."

The second hottest question is this one: "Are you thinking of using a word-processor?" And the answer is that I did for a little while, and I actually could have got one free from Apple, but I decided against it because it wouldn't help me all that much. And it would ruin the woman who types up my final manuscripts. I didn't want to create another bag lady.

When I went to college years ago, Hitler had come to power. The gas chambers and the horror camps were operating full blast. Europe and Asia were in flames. The Pacific fleet of the United States of America had been sunk in twenty feet of water at Pearl Harbor. The burning question in those days was, among males anyway, "Does penis size really matter?" The answer to that question, incidentally, was "Well, heck, maybe some, but probably not all that much. Try not to worry about it."

To get back to word-processors. The computer companies which are trying to get me to use a word-processor—who are moving their manufacturing operations to South Korea and Hong Kong and Mexico and so on, incidentally—they want me to put my typist out of work. And if some of you go into the computer business, that is going to become your principal endeavor—figuring out wonderful ways to put your neighbors out of work, no matter how complicated their jobs seem to be.

You know all those joggers you see in the big cities? Those are all top executives who have just been replaced by computers. Some of them run ten, twenty miles a day. They're doing what they can to be useful, which is to cover great distances without using gasoline. In a sense, they've declared war on Arabia. Then again, their shoes are made out of petroleum.

I have a friend named Howard Stein, who used to try to be a playwright. He wrote a play which was never produced and which I never read, but which was called *The Fading Wish*. So I finally asked him. I said, "Howard, what was that wish that finally faded in the play?" And he said, "The fading wish was the wish to be useful. That's what faded, the wish to be useful." My typist, because I don't use a word-processor, is still useful.

Am I a silly old poop who doesn't believe in technological progress? Yes, of course. I am worse than that. I am the enemy of technological progress which harms mankind. I'm against it even if it harms bluebirds. As far as that goes, practically all the bluebirds in this country were knocked off by DDT.

If you say I'm the kind of old poop who won't even use a typewriter, you're wrong. William Styron is that kind of old poop, incidentally. He won't use a typewriter, and God help him. Mark Twain used a typewriter. So did the German philosopher Frederick William Nietzsche. Nietzsche wrote these wonderful words on a typewriter, in German, of course: "Against human stupidity even the gods contend in vain."

And I use a typewriter. I just don't type as well as my typist does. The typewriter improves lives and puts nobody out of work. Editors and printers reading my manuscripts do not have to ruin their eyes trying to make out my handwriting. There can be no argument as to what this or that word is meant to be. The typewriter is a good invention.

Another good invention is Scotch tape. Another one is the

paper clip. A lousy invention is a rocket with a warhead that will kill everything in an area several miles square.

Another lousy invention is a firearm. I used to be a pretty good shot. I used to belong to the NRA when I was a kid. I hunted as a boy and served in the infantry, and I tell you that operating a firearm takes as much skill as operating a cigarette lighter. I think shooting is a very low form of recreation. Whenever I read a story in which some character is praised for operating a firearm well, I find it ridiculous. It's as though I were to point out to you some man walking by and tell you, "There goes the best man in this country with a Zippo, or a Bic, or a toaster."

There are a lot of works of literature which ask us, "Where is evil, and what is evil?" and which then conclude, "It is in the hearts of us all." We are all a little bit good and a little bit bad, and that's why life is a little bit good and a little bit bad. Well, you want to see evil playing? Just look down a missile silo. Go to the launching of an atomic submarine. Go look at the guns for sale at your local hock shop or hardware store.

WHEN I was young, old poops like the one I have become used to say I was lucky to be young in the twentieth century because so much technological progress was being made. We would soon fly faster than a rifle bullet. We would build a colony on the moon and then the planets. People would live for hundreds of years. Electricity generated by atomic energy would be so cheap it might not even be metered. And so on.

Progress was going to be a spectator sport. We were all supposed to stay glued to our radios as miracle after miracle came to pass. I think you're unlucky to be young today,

because progress seems bound and determined to make as many of you as possible useless. Unless, of course, you would like to spend the rest of your lives working in a fast food joint, working for minimum wage.

My first book, which is a great book like all the others, was called *Player Piano*. It was about a fully automated United States of America. I got the idea while I was working for General Electric as a public relations man. I was there at the same time Reagan was, working for the same department. I was privileged to see an early experiment with automation—a milling machine, which used to be run by a human being, but which was being run by punch cards instead. The intent was clearly to save the company some money and heartbreak. The punch cards didn't belong to a union, didn't want a health plan and a retirement plan and profit sharing and all that. Punch cards never came to work with hangovers or stayed away from work with the flu. That was a long time ago, before micro-chips. The idea of having a business of any kind with a whole lot of employees, now, full of crazy ideas and made out of meat, seems preposterous.

So it now becomes imperative for your generation to answer a really nagging question. It's not up to my generation. We took care of Hitler. That was enough. That was our job. We're getting ready to leave now. The nagging question your generation has to answer is this one: "What are people *for*? What are they to do while they are here?" And I congratulate this College on having such a large department of religion, because the answer is very likely to be found there.

I don't assume that you're thoroughly familiar with my work. My foot doctor thinks I wrote *Kon-Tiki.* My congressman thinks I wrote *A Clockwork Orange.* The most famous writers in America are Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, and Norman Mailer. The writers who appear most on television are Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, and Norman Mailer. American has two living winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature—Saul Bellow and Issac Singer. They're seldom mentioned in ordinary conversation, since neither one of them is also a television star. Saul Bellow, of course, wrote *Kon-Tiki.* Isaac Singer wrote *A Clockwork Orange.*

Before television, writers could become famous as talkers rather than writers, in large lecture halls and theaters. That's what we have here today—a human being standing in front of an audience—pre-electronic television. The principal disadvantage is that there is no laugh track or canned applause. And it's impossible to edit out bloopers. At least I'm in color.

Charles Dickens was a superb performance of pre-electronic television. The greatest of the American pre-electronic television stars was Mark Twain, after whom I named my son. My son has become a writer and a physician as well, but so far not a TV star. If Mark Twain were here today he would not have papers in his hand. He would appear to be telling you wise and amusing ideas which had just occurred to him. He would have, in fact, practiced for hours in front of a mirror, editing himself as though he were a piece of video tape or film. He made much more money as a performer than he did as a writer. When he incurred enormous debts in business in later life, he did not sit down to write another book. He hit the road as a performer. I'm sure you all know what he said about opera. He said he hadn't heard anything like it since the orphanage burned down.

I have not rehearsed this speech in front of a mirror, obviously. But I have taken a course in public speaking. And my instructor told me that the first rule was "Never Apologize." When I heard that, I realized that very few public speakers ever apologized, because they knew that first rule. It occurred to me that audiences might find an apology startling and refreshing. So let me try it out on you.

I apologize!

I'm sorry about everything, and I will do my best to make it up to you.

WRITERS tend not to live very long. I've already lived longer than F. Scott Fitzgerald, George Orwell, and D. H. Lawrence. Next year, if I make it, I will overtake Ernest Hemingway. Sitting still year after year is very bad for people, I think. Literary talent, incidentally, is very common. I found it was common at the University of Iowa, at Harvard, and at City College. What is rare is a willingness to sit still and be all alone year after year after year.

After I have died, after I have gone to the great bookmobile in the sky, I hope I will be remembered not for my books, not for my great speaking performances like this, but for my inventions. I consider myself principally an inventor. My education is technical, not literary. And among my outstanding inventions are the Kilgore Trout stories, the man-woman hour, analytic geometry applied to story telling, the government-issue extended family; and I propose to describe a new disease to you which I have identified.

THE man-woman hour. A man-woman hour is an hour during which a man and a woman are together, paying some attention to each other. If my wife and I watch "Dallas" together, for instance, and chat some about the treachery of the characters, this is a perfectly acceptable man-woman hour. An hour of ping-pong would also count.

The usefulness of such a unit of intimacy is in describing dispassionately how long a relationship between a man and a woman has actually been going on, or how long it actually lasted before it blew up. I am sick and tired of having people say, "Oh yes, we've been married for twenty-seven years," or "I had a romance that lasted all summer," or "Yes, we were lovers back in 1978," because I found they weren't telling me anything. And then I thought of a way to make them tell me something worth knowing, something that they themselves had probably never thought about before.

"This wonderful marriage of yours," I might say, "where we're expected to give you increasingly expensive gifts for each anniversary—how many man-woman hours have you two actually put in?" "During that magic springtime you spent with your lover in Paris, how many man-woman hours did you two actually put in?" And don't count sleep. No fair counting sleep.

You get no credit for sleeping accumulating man-woman hours. You shouldn't be able to snooze your way to a golden wedding anniversary. If you can measure something accurately, then you can compare it with others things in the same class. In an ideal marriage, in which sleep doesn't count, the husband and wife, if at least one of them works away from home, will put in forty-five man-woman hours a week. That's five man-woman hours for each weekday, ten man-woman hours on Saturday, another ten on Sunday. Forty-five man-woman hours a week.

So there's your basic man-woman week. That comes to two thousand, three hundred, and forty man-woman hours a year for an ideal family. I round that off to two thousand man-woman hours a year. And I say that should be the standard against which intimate relationships should be compared. If some senator, for instance, wants to be congratulated on having stayed with the same wife for a quarter of a century, the smart reporter would want to know how often this man was actually home. He might discover that the senator had spent only three thousand hours with his wife. And he can compare it with the two thousand man-woman hours an ideal couple puts in every year. Puts a headline in the paper the next morning: "Senator Fogbound married for only a year and a half, if that."

So much for great love stories and paragons of domesticity. It so happens that I have a vested interest. I want the concept of the man-woman hour and the ideal two thousand man-woman year to be widely respected. Why? Because I work at home and so does my wife. We put in 105 man-woman hours a week. Every five months we should be entitled to celebrate an anniversary.

ANOTHER one of my inventions is the Kilgore Trout story. Kilgore Trout is a fictitious science-fiction writer hideously underpaid and unnoticed who appears in many books of mine. He has written hundreds of novels. Every so often in a book of mine I will describe in a hundred words or less the plot of one of his books. These plots are all ideas for books which occurred to me. I would start to write the book, but then I would think, "Why should I do this back-breaking

work when I could describe what would be good about the book in a hundred words or less?" I got this idea talking to friends about science-fiction novels we'd read. And it turned out I would tell him in a hundred words or less what was good about this science-fiction novel, and then, in a hundred words or less, he would tell me what was good about another one. And why anyone would bother to run these things out to book length, I don't know. Hard on them and hard on the readers.

There is a typical Kilgore Trout story which I could have run out to book length and worn myself out, and the reader too, with no real gain. But there is this creature; there is this planet, another planet. You mustn't laugh at this, because you would show how ethnocentric you were if you'd laugh; but these people do not converse as we do. They communicate by tap dancing and breaking wind. And so they decide to send a scout to this planet, as they suspect it is inhabited. And they send a scout, and it communicates in the manner as I have described. And he comes in his little flying saucer, and he lands in Connecticut at night. It is a beautiful summer night, but he sees a terrible thing the minute he lands. There is this beautiful colonial house on fire, with fire just breaking out on top of the roof. So he runs into the house and tries to wake everybody up, speaking his language, and the owner of the house kills him with a golf club. The story of a tragic failure to communicate.

The story is based on an actual event during my childhood in Indianapolis. During the great Depression, there were two ways to make money even though everybody else was poor. One was to teach your kid to tap dance, and the other was to teach your kid to play the marimba. And so there were all these kids in Indianapolis taking tap dancing lessons and marimba lessons. And next to us lived the Fairchilds, and

little Bobby Fairchild was taking tap dancing lessons, and the family was paying for these at great sacrifice. And he'd tell you he was only seven years old, and he was kept pretty much under wraps until he'd gotten pretty advanced and might be ready to go to Hollywood and dance with Shirley Temple.

And so the neighbors were finally invited over to watch Bobby perform. And we sat in the living room, and they turned the dining room into a backstage area there, and they had curtains, drapes that they could draw across the opening. So it was a very nice little proscenium stage. So they put a Victrola record on and pulled backed the curtain. And out came Bobby with a little top hat and a bow tie and patent leather shoes and a cane with a white tip on it and everything, and he was really tap dancing. He was a little Fred Astaire. But he was in such a high state of alarm that he was breaking wind the whole time he was tap dancing, and I just never forgot it. If you do it, of course, if you're in his situation, you break wind in time to the music.

AND I also brought analytic geometry to literature. [Fig. 1]

This is the G-I axis: good fortune, ill fortune.

This is the B-E axis: B for beginning, E for electricity.

A very popular story—feel perfectly free to use it if you like—the technical name for it is "Man in Hole," but it doesn't have to be a man, and it doesn't have to be a hole. Somebody gets into trouble, gets out of it again. People *adore* this story, so please do use it if you want to. [Fig. 2] You take a person [A], an extremely unhappy, impoverished person here, probably sick as well; and this would be an extremely rich, popular person at the top [B]. You can start your story

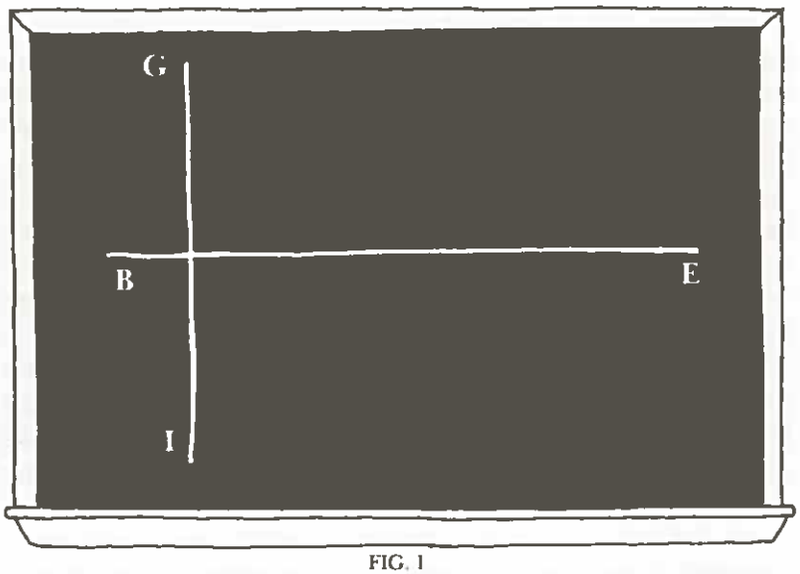

FIG. 1

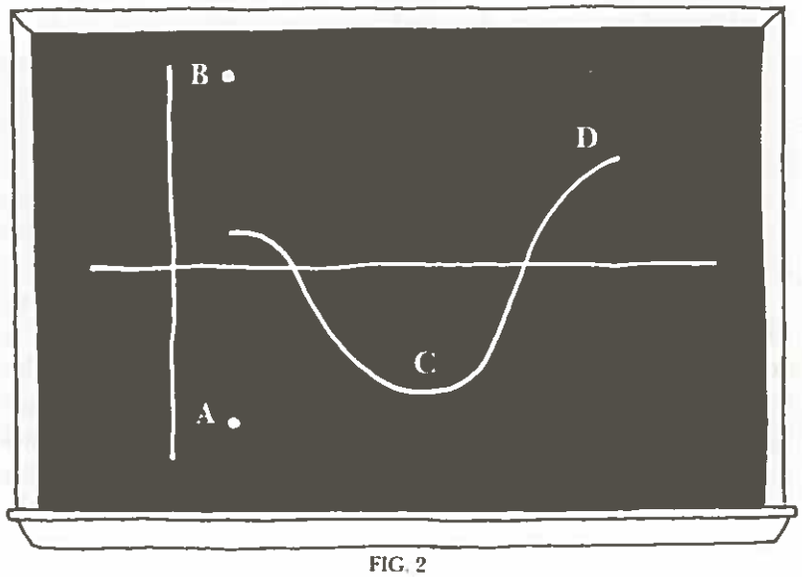

FIG. 2

anywhere you want; we will start with a slightly above average person.

The person gets into some kind of trouble [C], gets out of it again [D]. Now you notice that this end here is higher than when we began, because this person has become famous for being the person who got into a hole and got out of it again. Most people haven't had such an adventure.... So he thinks to himself "By God, I got into that trouble; I got out of it again." Do use this; it's not copyrighted.

Take another one, slightly more complicated, slightly prettier curve [Fig. 3]. Take a perfectly average person here [A], on a perfectly average day, doesn't expect anything much that day, perfectly content to go bumping along on that straight line there, finds something he likes [B], boy does he feel good—or she; I don't mean to be sexist about this at all—loses it [C], oh heck!, gets it back [D]. People love that.

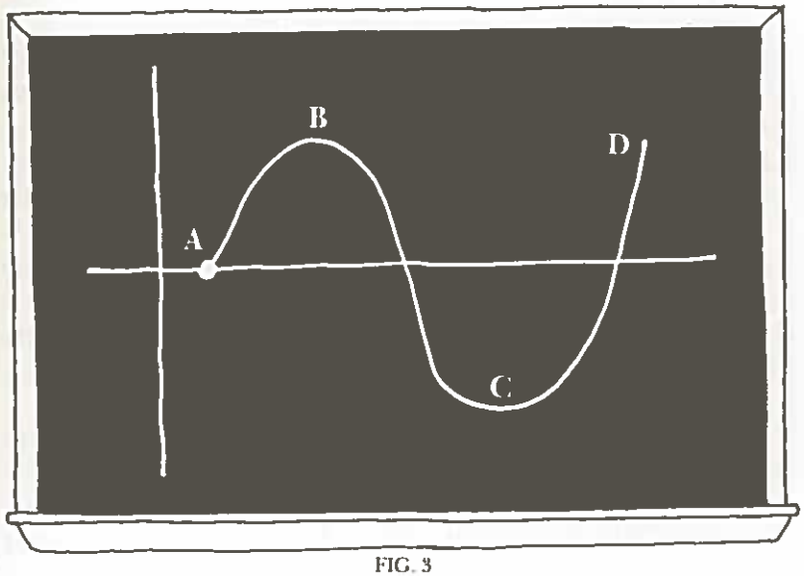

FIG. 3

When I compare it to the sophistication of our society, I gave up African anthropology because I thought primitive people were so stupid and ignorant I just couldn't stand it. If you will look at books of Indian legends—or from *any* primitive society, it doesn't matter—their stories are so *dumb:* [Fig. 4] "Oh, we crossed a river [A], we went up the mountain, we went down the mountain, Little Beaver got sick, Grandmother died...." There's no rise or fall. With minds like that it's no wonder that they were wiped out.

Now just to put primitive people even more to shame, our most popular story: and you're free to borrow this one if you want—you can make a fortune if you want to tell it tomorrow—people never tire of it. Starts very low down here [B]. This is a person very unhappy. Why? Her mother has died; her father has remarried a battleaxe with two ugly daughters... They all go to the party and she has to stay home.

Fairy godmother shows up and says, "I'm going to help you out. I'm going to give you shoes [C], I'm going to give you mascara [D], panty-hose [E], whatever it is...means of transportation [F], all that, going to give it all to you." You get stairsteps; this accumulates up. She goes to the party, dances with the prince, has a swell time. Bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong, bong [G].

Note: we don't drop down to the level she was; she's happier because she remembers dancing with the prince and having a swell time at the party. So it'd be a great mistake in drawing her dropped down at this level. But she's still pretty blue. The prince comes along and the shoe fits. She becomes infinitely happy—off the scale [H].

Now why that shape, that's complicated, should be so popular is mystifying to me as I inspect these nice sine curves and so forth...but that this crazy shape should be the most popular of all our stories is mystifying to me—or was—until I

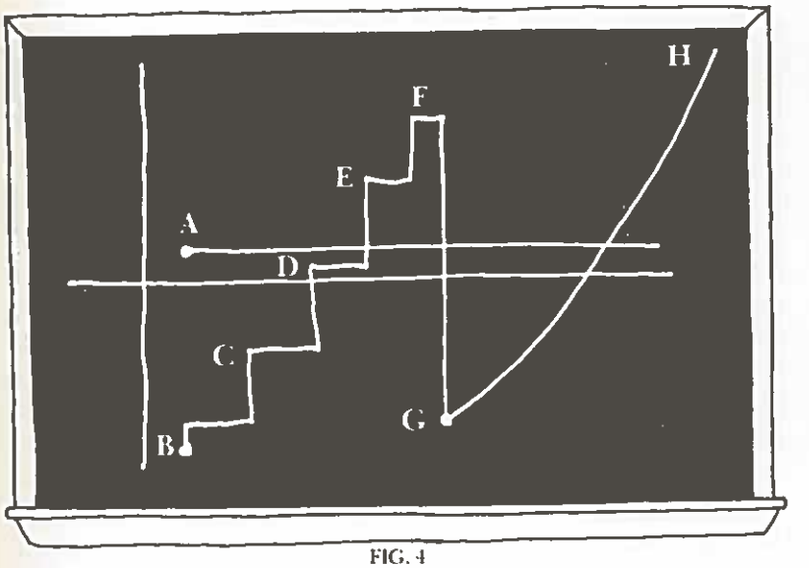

FIG. 4

said "Maybe our love with this story is bone deep, or maybe it's so deep because it describes the Old and the New Testaments. It's every creation myth, including the dumb peoples'. God gave us the sand [C], God gave us the beaver [D], God gave us the walnut tree [E], God gave us the ocean [F], God gave us the sun, God gave us the eagle, and all that. Just as I drew what the fairy godmother did. That's how everybody's creation myth goes—every society on earth. And it's true of ours. And every other creation myth ends with that accumulation; that's all.

We with the Old Testament as part of our religious heritage have this extraordinary event of losing it all [G]; and this is the Christian hope, the Resurrection [H]. I think that's why we like the story. If not, it's good enough for college, anyway.

Now then, there's one story about one infinity sign here; I'll show you another one [Fig. 5]. There is a young man, with

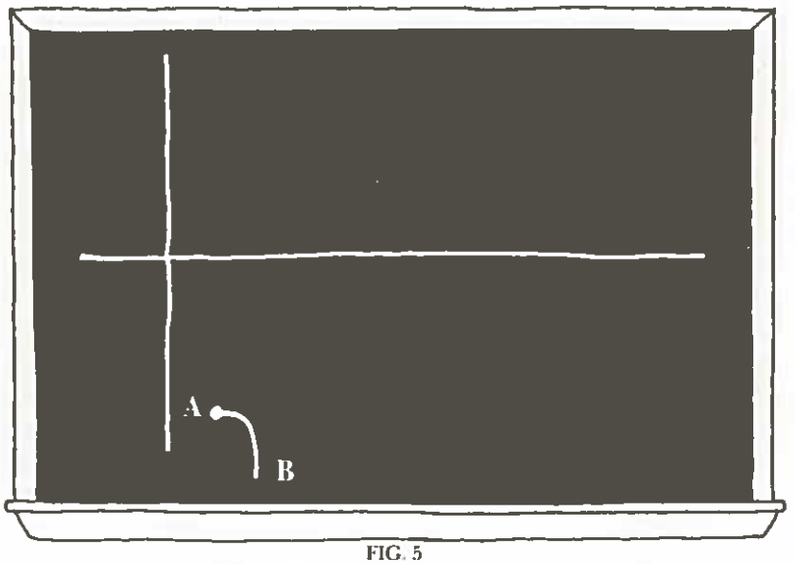

FIG. 5

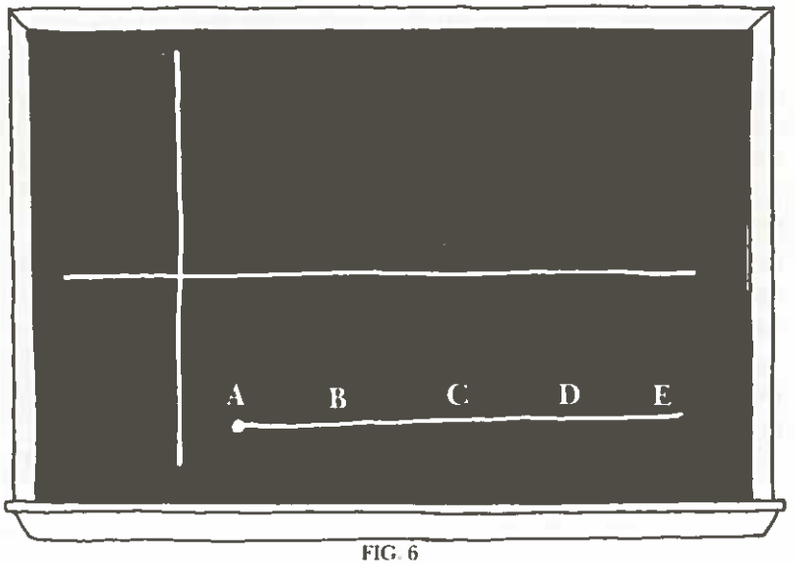

FIG. 6

the most disagreeable relatives you can imagine, in Prague. They are poor; they have no fun; he has to work; he has a horrible job, hates getting up every Monday to go to work, detests his job, and has no hope of promotion, no hope of love or any joy in his life [A]. He wakes up one morning, time to go to work; he has turned into a cockroach [B]! That is Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

Okay. Now this seems like a joke, and I pretend to be joking all the time because I am a very insecure person. Now someone said you could never graph a serious work of art in this manner, that only popular stories would allow themselves to be graphed in this way, and that no masterpiece could ever be treated like this, that they are beyond—that they are in existence in another dimension.

But then a year ago I said "What the hell, I'm going to try and graph *Hamlet* anyway." So I'll show you what happened [Fig. 6]. Hamlet's down on this level—same level as Cinderella for the same reason—death in the family: father died, disagreeable new in-laws [A]. So Hamlet's father's ghost appears on the parapet and says "Hamlet, you must avenge me somehow." Is the appearance of the ghost good or bad news? Can't tell [B]. Ophelia goes crazy—is that good or bad news? Can't tell [C]. Kills Polonius—good news or bad news? Can't tell [D]. Finally Hamlet is killed—good news or bad news? Can't tell [E]. So Shakespeare was as dumb as any Indian.

And I've explained to you why I think the Cinderella story pleases us so much, to the depth of our souls. I'll tell you why I think we believe *Hamlet* to be our principal literary masterpiece: because that is what we actually believe about life. And in all the swooping here, that we're encouraged to believe that this is good or that is bad, but actually in our bones we are unable to be sure of what is good news and what is bad news;

and that is Shakespeare at his most honest. Can't tell what is good news and bad news in life actually, because this rise and fall is merely pretense.

Now I will do you the enormous favor of bringing this analytic geometry into your personal lives. I'm here to do you an enormous favor. People expect this rise and fall in their lives. All I've done is describe how to tell a successful story, how to write a successful story. We are saturated with stories; on television we can watch thirty a day if we want to stay in front of that thing long enough. In school we read so many stories and we get used to this rise and fall; and this rise and fall is an ideal only in story telling, but we have heard the stories so much that we believe that they are models for life.

And so there are all these people wandering around saying "Well, I feel alright, but it really isn't much of a story." People are breaking up marriages saying, "Yes, it's a nice house, and the kids are alright, and you're a nice enough person and everything, but something's missing." What's missing? It isn't a very good story. Because people use stories as standards for comparison, which is preposterous. Stories are artifacts; they were never meant to prescribe how life should be lived. And so people break up their marriages looking for this rise and fall; and believe me, if they come to New York they'll get it.

That's as far as I'll talk to you here for now though I really have made many more discoveries with regard to this.

THE government-issue extended family, as I presented this in another great book of mine called *Slapstick*. The overwhelming illness in American society is loneliness. And you in this small school have created a folk society where you all know each other and understand each other quite

well, and this is very congenial. And you are wise to seek such a society, as human beings are most comfortable in settings such as this. But most of us cannot live in folk societies like this and are hideously alone on that account; we don't have enough relatives. There are people in New York who call the Police Department because they're apt to act violently at times. Governments are called upon to do everything because there are all these people with no friends and no relatives.

So I proposed in *Slapstick* that the Social Security Administration issue everybody an official relative. Now this is a reform that costs nothing, which is part of the novelty, and you will be in a lottery, and you will receive from the Social Security Administration, which has your address, a notice that henceforth your middle name is Bluebird-3, or henceforth your name is Walnut-17. You will get a directory; you will be related to everybody whose middle name has "Walnut" in it. You will get a directory of Walnuts who will be members of your clan, and your immediate family will be the Walnut-17's, and you will get a directory of them.

So if you move from here to San Diego and you don't know a soul there, you've got relatives there. "Hi, this is Wally Walnut-17 Smith. I looked you up in the directory. Can you tell me the name of a good dentist? Can you tell me the name of a good realtor? Is this company that's offering me a job any good?" And this person you call up is not required to treat you any better than he treats his relatives anyway. He can hang up on you if he wants.

You can go to a fellow Walnut-17 and say "Lend me some money." You can say to him what you say to your worthless brother-in-law, which is "Go to hell." But there is a reason to approach somebody and ask for the most ordinary sort of help, which over millions of years human beings have been offering each other. "I've got to go down to the doctor, I may

be a couple of hours, can you please come and watch over the baby? The baby won't be any trouble, the baby's asleep, the baby's been fed, and I can't get anybody else, you know, we're related." Maybe the person will, maybe they won't. Maybe the person will worry about you while you're gone, maybe they won't. Maybe they'll lend you money, maybe they won't.

And I think this thing would work. And I'm not joking about it; it would be so comforting to this country. It would be such an amusing game, if nothing else—certainly a hell of a lot more amusing than World War III, which is the other experiment that is being considered now. I think it would work. More people would think about it and say, "Yeah, I'd start to like that family of mine, and yeah, I would start looking after my relatives."

AND now I will describe a disease I have discovered. And this is in the nature of a medical document worthy of being printed in the *New England Journal of Medicine,* and so it's rather stuffy to begin with. It gets better as it goes on.

What has America's greatest contribution to the culture of this planet been? As many people would say—Jazz. I will say Alcoholics Anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous is the first scheme to deal successfully with the tragic mysteries of addiction—addiction not simply to alcohol, but to all sorts of chemicals which can give pleasure briefly, but which in the long term can turn the lives of the addicts and those around them into hell.

The Alcoholics Anonymous scheme, which can work only if an addict will admit regularly that this or that chemical is poison to him or her, is now proving its effectiveness with compulsive gamblers who do not swallow pleasure-giving chemicals or sniff them or inject them into their veins. Compulsive gamblers generate bad chemicals inside themselves when the cards are dealt or the dice are rattled. Compulsive gamblers have learned to be their own producers of what are to them dangerous subtances.

At a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, a member is expected to introduce himself in this manner: "My name is so and so, and I'm an alcoholic." At a meeting of Gamblers Anonymous, a member is expected to introduce himself in this manner: "My name is so and so, and I'm a compulsive gambler." Members are encouraged to testify at meetings as to how chemicals they swallow or generated within themselves alienated their friends and relatives, lost them jobs and houses, deprived them of their last shreds of self-respect. Not every member has sunk quite that low, of course, but many have, if not most. Many, if not most members, have had to do what they call "hitting bottom" before seeking help, before admitting what it is that has been ruining their lives for so long.

I wish tonight to call attention to another dangerous form of addiction which has not been previously identified as such. It is like compulsive gambling, since the afflicted person seeks situations which will cause his body to release certain exciting chemicals into his bloodstream. We should recognize that there are among us those who are tragically hooked on preparations for war. Not for war itself, but preparations for war. Tell them that war is coming and we have to get ready for it, and for a little while they're as happy as an alcoholic who has jut had three martinis for breakfast, or a junkie who's just shot up with heroin.

Let us recognize how sick such people are and stop encouraging them when they satisfy their craving. From now on, when a national leader or even just a neighbor starts talking about some new weapons system which is only going to cost

eleven trillion dollars, we should speak up. We should say something on the order of, "Honest to God, I couldn't be sorrier for you if I'd just watched you wash down a handful of amphetamines with a pint of Southern Comfort."

I mean it. I'm not joking. Compulsive preparers for World War III are as tragically, yes, and as repulsively addicted as any wino passed out in a toilet stall in a bus terminal. For an alcoholic to experience a few moments of happiness, he needs maybe three dollars worth of grain alcohol. For a compulsive gambler to experience a few moments of happiness, he needs only a few dollars to risk at the tables. But for a person addicted to preparations for war to experience a few moments of fleeting happiness, we may have to buy him the most expensive single artifact in history so far, which is a Trident submarine.

If Western Civilization, which blankets most of the world now, surely includes the Soviet Union, and if Western Civilization were a person, we should be directing that person to the nearest meeting of War Preparers Anonymous. We should be telling him to stand up before the meeting and say, "My name is Western Civilization. I am a compulsive war preparer. I have lost everything I ever cared about. I should have come here long ago. I first hit bottom in World War I."

I am serious. Western Civilization can't be represented by a single person, but a single explanation for the disastrous course it has followed in this bloody century is possible. We the people have, again and again, mistaken for great leaders very sick persons, compulsive preparers for war. If we the people stop making this tragic mistake, perhaps set up treatment centers for the addicts who have ruined us, then Western Civilization's long, hard trip back to permanent sobriety can begin.

Appeasement. That is something the war preparers say we

should never engage in, or something terrible will happen to us. We won't get to vote anymore. But everywhere I look, I see appeasement going on—in North and South America, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, in Europe. Who is being appeased? Communists? Neo-Nazis? No! It's the compulsive preparers for war. I can scarcely name a nation now which has not lost most of its freedom and wealth in trying to appease its own addicts to preparations for war. And there is no appeasing an addict for very long. "Honest to God, man. Just give me enough money for a few mobile re-entry vehicles and a fleet of B-1 bombers, and I'll never bother you again."

Most addictions start innocently enough in childhood, I think, under agreeable, reputable auspices—a sip of champagne at a wedding, a game of poker for matchsticks on a rainy afternoon. Addicts for war preparations have been encouraged when babies, perhaps, to clap their hands with glee at a campfire or Fourth of July parade. And only a few nuts really get hooked, of course. Not every child who gets a cap gun in his Christmas stocking is going to be saying later that the only way for us to be happy and safe is to knock down incoming missiles with laser beams. Not every child who sees his father shoot a quail on a crisp autumn morning is later going to tell us that we must stop squandering money on education and public health and food and shelter and clothing and so on, and put the next generations in hock up to their ears in order that we can protect our way of life with invincible weaponry.

Please note that I am talking about an addition to preparations for war—parades and test firings and ship christenings and planning secret strategies and so on. I am not talking about an addiction to war itself, which is a very different matter. A compulsive preparer for war no more wants to go to war than an alcoholic wants to wind up in a public toilet stall

in a bus station.

SHOULD addicts of any sort hold high office in this or any other country? Absolutely not! For their first priority is always going to be to satisfy their addiction, no matter how terrible the consequences may be, even to themselves.

Suppose we had an alcoholic president who still had not hit bottom and whose chief companions were drunks like himself. And suppose it were a fact made absolutely clear to him that if he took one more drink, the whole planet would blow up. So he has all the liquor thrown out of the White House, including his after-shave lotion.

So late that night he's terribly restless, crazy for a drink, but proud of not drinking. So he opens the White House refrigerator, looking for a Tab or Diet Pepsi, he tells himself. And there, half hidden behind the family-size jar of French's mustard, is an unopened can of Budweiser. What do you think he'll do?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Born in Indiana in 1922, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. is perhaps best known for his literary rages. A Guggenheim Fellowship paved the way for his *Slaughterhouse-Five*, though he had earlier published pieces of science-fiction, but clearly only as medium for his jeremiads. He entered the arena of social commentary with *Breakfast of Champions*, *Jailbird*, and *Slapstick*, all indictments, in varying degrees of virulence, of cosmopolitan mores. He has not shied from controversy and shows no sign even at advanced age of any such inclination.

Born in New Hampshire in 1945, Alan Farrell, like Vonnegut, fought in a war and came home to find he couldn't get along with anybody. An unlikely catechumen to the gospel according to Vonnegut, Farrell as language professor studies the visceral syntax through which Vonnegut spits his evangile into the face of his public. Associate Professor of Modern Languages at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, he will probably remain right there and just that for some time.

COLOPHON

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